



THREE FACES OF GOD

*Do you refer to the God of your understanding as You, Me, or He?
A multifaceted “integral” approach embraces all three
perspectives, say leading spiritual teachers.*

BY KAREN KELLY

The soul soars freely when unconstrained by words, wrote Walt Whitman in “A Clear Midnight.” Yet words are all we have to describe what for many is indescribable. Through the ages, in our quest to define God, we have struggled for words because we have struggled to reconcile all the ways in which we can experience God.

Is God inside of us, the truth of our being? Or is God outside of us, the divine “other” to which we pray? Is God the totality of all that is in the physical universe, or does God include and transcend everything manifest? Might all of these perspectives be true?

American philosopher Ken Wilber, author of *Integral Spirituality*, says the spiritual wholeness we seek can result from embracing all of these perspectives, which he calls the “Three Faces of God.”

Most of us are familiar with three different perspectives from which to approach and describe God. These perspectives determine whether we address God in the first, second, or third person:

- 1** God as Ground of Being is the First Face of God. It is the experiential “I”—God within us, or God immanent.
- 2** God as an entity to whom we relate and pray to is the Second Face. It is God as “Thou” or “You.”
- 3** God present in the manifest world as the Web of Life, as Nature, as All That Is, is the Third Face. It is ‘He/She/It’ and is understood through our senses.

Turn page to continue story.

Joy and Truth in the First Face of God

This is the God that is “closer than hands and feet,” with us always and unfailingly. Here God is the great “I AM.” Various faith traditions describe achieving a First Face awareness of God, whether it’s referred to as Christ Consciousness (in New Thought) or God-consciousness (in Islam and Hinduism). When we are aware of our Oneness with Spirit, our role is to express God in the world. Wilber refers to this First Face of God as “the singular, to which the plural is unknown” and the “Open Awareness behind all experience.”

But the first-person perspective of God requires proper context, says Rev. Robert Brumet, instructor of Integral Spirituality at Unity Institute. “The danger is thinking that my ego is God,” he says. “We’re not referring to the personality that has my name and my face; we’re referring to the reality that’s behind the covering.”

Everybody Likes the Third Face of God

The Third Face of God is “The Great Web of Life,” God everywhere present, reflected in Acts 17:28: For “In him we live and move and have our being.”

We experience this Third Face of God as the grandeur of brilliant stars against an ink-black night sky, or the intelligent order of the unseen world witnessed through a powerful microscope, or hidden within the mysteries of the deep seas. It is evident in the wings of a dainty hummingbird or a flower bud pushing up through the snow in spring. This is the face of God that looks back at us through a newborn baby’s eyes or creates the etched lines on old faces.

We witness and absorb the Third Face of God through our senses, experiencing awe and wonder at the greatness of life. Who doesn’t like the Third Face of God? For some, it is the only concept of God they’ll even consider.

The Three Faces of God is a concept born from “Integral Approach,” a framework for understanding human knowledge and experience that can be applied to many disciplines, from politics and economics to spirituality and art. To read more about the integral approach, go to unitymagazine.org/integral.

The Controversial Second Face of God

“Sometimes I have written a letter to God,” Unity cofounder Myrtle Fillmore wrote to a constituent in the 1920s, “when I have wanted to be sure that something would have divine consideration and love and attention.”

This loving act of faith is an example of the Second Face of God.

It’s the *unhealthy* version of the Second Face of God that has created so much trouble throughout history. Since medieval times and within hierarchical religions, the Second Face of a judgmental God who metes out punishments and rewards has been used as a weapon to marginalize, kill, emotionally wound, and control people and circumstances. Abuse of the Second Face of God resulted in a judgmental superbeing before whom we all stood as sinners. This is the God that has driven people away from traditional churches and provided the catalyst for atheism.

Yet by rejecting the Second Face of God relationship entirely, we miss the richness offered by a *healthy* version. This is an understanding of God with whom we can experience personal and intimate relationship in our daily lives, to whom we can express gratitude and love and surrender. It’s God as unconditionally loving parent, comforter, supportive friend. The Second Face of God is the Father Jesus affectionately called “Abba” and to whom

he taught us to pray. In my own life, I’ve often yearned for the personal relationship with the Second Face of God the Father that I loved growing up as a Lutheran. It’s the same understanding of God I surrendered to as an alcoholic entering recovery almost 26 years ago.

Spiritual seekers today can benefit from this healthy Second Face of God, says Unity Institute and Seminary instructor Rev. Robert Brumet, revitalizing its enormous potential value for our spiritual life. In fact, he says, it’s absolutely critical for our spiritual growth to revisit this Second Face relationship, especially if it’s been unhealthy.

“If I’ve been wounded by an unhealthy Second Face of God relationship, it’s important to address that God I believe those wounds came from and heal from that experience,” Brumet says. “God Itself is not inherent in that unhealthy experience; it’s only the way that the Second Face was used.”

Although Unity teachings emphasize the First Face of God, there are many elegant, moving examples of Second Face prayers, poems, and prose by Unity authors such as H. Emilie Cady, Eric Butterworth, and James Dillet Freeman.

All Three Faces of God Are Important

Wilber builds the case that a balanced spiritual awareness suffers if we don’t embrace all three faces of God. He says most every world religion throughout history has identified with only one face of God and ignored or rejected the others. But there are dangers in doing so.

Misunderstanding the First Face of God can inflate the ego of a finite mind, which then confuses itself with Infinite Mind. Conversely, the Second Face of God as Other is the “great devotional leveler, the great ego killer,” as Wilber puts it. If we focus on only the Third Face of God perspective, we are left interpreting Spirit only via external stimuli, eliminating the rich interior world of meditation. Although each face of God offers new ways to recognize, experience and be God, we cheat ourselves if we ignore any of them.

Could this be the puzzle piece to complete the picture of a balanced spiritual life?

We Can Experience All Three Faces

It is exciting to begin consciously including all three faces of God into one’s spiritual practice.

The First Face of God comes easily to us in Unity. The first Unity principle, “There is only One Presence and One Power in the Universe and in my life; God the Good, Omnipotence,” supports this. However, that understanding

can sometimes be superficial, cautions Brumet.

“We refer to God as the I AM,” he says, “and ‘God is closer to me than I am,’ or ‘God is the core.’ We can talk about that forever, but it’s very different from *knowing* that the core of my being is the divine. It’s a whole different level; there’s the language, the belief, and then the actual experience.”

The Second Face of God offers a very intimate perspective, says Brumet. “We may be reluctant to use Second Face lest it be seen as putting God up in the sky, but that’s not necessarily so. Think of how we would relate to a parent, sibling, partner, or lover. It’s a quality of relating to God with the heart, which can be missing in the first and third person.”

The Third Face of God provides a heightened awareness of God’s energy in every living being, perhaps motivating us to increase our commitment to the health of our planet and all who inhabit it.

How It Could Work

How can we fully actualize all three faces of God? Rev. Paul Smith, cominister at Broadway Church in Kansas City, Missouri, and author of *Integral Christianity: The Spirit’s Call to Evolve*, offers an example of what faith may sound like when we incorporate all three faces of God:

God, in which we live and move and have our being.

(The Infinite—Third Face)

You are always with us.

(The Intimate—Second Face)

We are the light of the world.

(The Inner—First Face)

We can “live into” all three of these understandings, as Jesus taught and demonstrated. To the degree we incorporate each of the Three Faces of God into our awareness, we will lead richer lives as fully human, fully divine beings. ■

Note: You can join an online discussion about the Three Faces of God at unitymagazine.org/faces. Or send a comment to be considered for our Letters page to the editor at lapptm@unityonline.org.

